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**UNITED STATES DRUG ENFORCEMENT POLICY IN COLOMBIA: CONFLICT OF
PRIORITIES IN CONTROLLING THE FLOW OF COCAINE TO THE UNITED
STATES**

CAPT James E. Ratte, Jr.

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Fundamentals of Strategic Logic

SEMINAR G

PROFESSOR

Dr. Inderjit Singh and Mr. Allen Keiswetter

ADVISOR

CAPT Craig Rankin

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UNITED STATES DRUG ENFORCEMENT POLICY IN COLOMBIA: CONFLICT OF PRIORITIES IN CONTROLLING THE FLOW OF COCAINE TO THE UNITED STATES

The Republic of Colombia is a nation that is caught between several rocks and hard choices. On one hand, Colombia's existence as a democratic nation is threatened by a number of well-established drug trafficking organizations, two leftist guerrilla armies, a right-wing paramilitary force and a poorly equipped, trained, and led military. On the other hand, Colombia faces considerable pressure from the United States to halt the illegal export of narcotics. The catch is that Colombia cannot acquire financial aid to address the former without first addressing the latter. Although seemingly related objectives, the Colombian people are stuck in the middle and fair much worse in the absence of a stable social structure. Colombian President Andres Pastrana must decide whether to first take action to establish the "Rule of Law" as a foundation of fundamental social and economic reform, or to begin by framing the house, worry about the foundation later, and target what the United States Drug Enforcement Administration sources say is a 90 percent market share of cocaine exports to the United States.¹ To date, President Pastrana has chosen to take the money and muddle through in a manner that has not reduced the effects of guerrilla activity, improved the lot for the typical Colombian or reduced drug exports. The United States has put Colombia in an untenable situation on an unworkable path to neither social nor economic reform.

Historical Perspective-Colombia

Colombia is the fourth largest country in South America with 1000 miles of coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Lying next to the Isthmus of Panama, which until

¹ Alan Sipress, "U.S. Reassesses Colombia Aid. Anti-Drug Efforts Studied as Powell Visits Bogata," *The Washington Post*, 10 September 2001.

1903 was a part of its territory, Colombia is a strategic crossroads in the network of communications between North, Central and South America. Colombia has a democratic form of government. Civil rights, social guarantees, and private property rights are foremost provisions of the constitution and laws of the country. Traditionally the country has been run through a two-party system; however, the Communist party is legal and ample freedom exists for the establishment of other political organizations. With an area of about 440,000 square miles, Colombia's physical backbone is the northern Andes mountain chain. Tropical characteristics are the common denominator of climate conditions in Colombia with the population largely concentrated in the mountainous interior. Although Colombia is often included in the group of less developed nations of the world, its traditional dependence on agricultural and mining is being changed by a steady trend toward industrial and technological modernization. The world financial crisis in the 1980's hit Colombia, but its economy is somewhat less troubled than other countries in Latin America that are on the verge of bankruptcy from recession and high foreign debts. Colombia's agricultural industry also faces a decline in its relative contribution to the GNP. In part this decline is due to a combination of natural factors, but to an even greater degree, decades of social unrest and violence have plagued rural areas as well as a shift in crops from subsistence to drugs.² Subsistence farmers and landless-illiterate peasants are being drawn into open revolt by leftist guerrilla movements.

In 1989, the government cracked down on local drug traffickers after they assassinated the Liberal party's presidential candidate. A state of emergency was declared, and the government attempted to seize drug cartel assets and extradite traffickers to the United States for trial. In response, the drug traffickers began a series of bombings and killings. In February 1990, the

² *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia Deluxe*, copyright 1998, The Learning Company, Inc., "Colombia."

presidents of Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia – the world’s three largest cocaine-producing countries – met in Cartagena with the president of the United States – the world’s top cocaine-consuming country. They agreed to exchange United States economic and military aid for increased efforts to combat the drug trade. A factor complicating drug enforcement efforts is the cultural acceptance of drug use in Latin America since it is both legal to grow (small amounts for personal use) and use marijuana, opium and coca (cocaine). From 1990 to 2000 the area devoted to coca growth in Colombia has grown by a factor of four. Compared to Bolivia and Peru whose coca production has dropped by 70 percent since 1995, Colombia’s drug enforcement program is a dismal failure.³ The largest increases took place under President Ernesto Samper Pizano, who was accused of accepting drug money to finance his campaign. A House of Representatives dominated by the President’s Liberal Party acquitted him despite evidence to the contrary. As a result of the rapid growth in coca production, President Clinton declared that Colombia was uncooperative in helping the United States combat the production and distribution of narcotics. This ruling made Colombia ineligible for most United States economic aid and spelled economic disaster to the embattled administration of President Pizano. President Andres Pastrana took office in 1998 with a promise to achieve peace in Latin America’s longest running civil war. However, to accomplish his plan for peace, Colombia required renewed ties with the United States. A prerequisite to renewed ties was a workable drug enforcement plan.

³ *U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “Narcotics Control Report 2000.”*

Civil War in Colombia-Tie to the Drug War

More people are fighting more frequently in more parts of Colombia than at any point since the civil war began in 1964⁴; up to 40,000 people in the last decade have been killed.⁵ Once confined to a cluster of central provinces, intense fighting now touches both southwestern and eastern provinces and has become a permanent feature of the southern jungles where army and paramilitary forces are contesting rebel control for the first time. Guerilla warfare, now financed by illegal drugs, threatens to destabilize Colombia's Latin American neighbors and raises serious national security issues for the United States. With the peace process losing ground and civilian casualties and human rights violations on the rise, the four-sided civil war is becoming more acute. The leading actors are two Marxist-oriented rebel armies, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), pitted against the Colombian army and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Although generally pro-government, the AUC is a non-government sponsored paramilitary force that mutated from a consolidation of self-defense groups formed as private armies to protect land-owners in the late 1970's to early 1980's. Their clashes traditionally have occurred sporadically, often under cover of darkness, through quick strikes against civilians, kidnapping, sabotage and bombings or in accidental meetings between each other in the jungle.

A number of factors have conspired in recent years to change that pattern. With the demise of the Medellin Cartel and Cali Mafia, the drug trade has become more decentralized and power has passed to experienced traffickers who are now operating as independents in the southwest

⁴ Scott Wilson, "When War Moves In, Colombia's Intensifying Conflict Brings Drugs, New Fears to Once-Stable Areas," *The Washington Post*, 6 September 2001.

⁵ Steve Salisbury, "U.S. Facing Colombian Dilemma," *The Washington Times*, 11 September 2001.

lowlands and along the Caribbean coast. The lack of central control has drawn in FARC, ELN and AUC forces into the lucrative drug trade in the form of a transportation tax (protection money to move drugs through their respective territory) and in some cases as independent coca growers.⁶ With drug revenues mounting, Colombia's armed groups are well financed and have been able to launch massive recruitment campaigns. According to a Colombian military report, a recent assessment of the FARC strength notes the presence of an estimated 10,000 additional operatives inside Colombia's largest urban centers serving in a noncombatant role but providing intelligence to the FARC commanders.⁷ Although smaller, ELN and AUC membership is about 13,000 and 8,000 respectively. Membership has also been stimulated by a downturn in the economy as well as unemployment that hovers near 20 percent.

Overall, it is difficult to say which of the three groups is the worst. All are involved in the drug trade, use intimidation, kidnapping, torture and execution to pacify the areas under their respective controls, they fight each other as readily as the military, kill civilians that show support for one of the opposite groups and all claim to be the champion of the people. The military has also been accused of human rights violations and often work with the AUC, a fact that has seriously weakened the military's credibility with many Colombians and abroad.

Despite the military's record, President Pastrana has staked his presidency on achieving peace with the guerrillas. Under pressure from senior military commanders eager for a freer hand in prosecuting the civil war, he recently signed legislation giving the military broad new powers to wage war with less scrutiny from government investigators. The measure circumvents

⁶ *U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, "Traffickers From Colombia."*

⁷ Tod Robberson, "U.S. Aid at Issue as Colombia Conflicts Shifts. Questions For Powell Visit: Is Support Helping Fight Against Drug Trade? Is More Needed?" *The Dallas Morning News*, 9 September 2001.

civilian rule and further erodes civil liberties in areas declared by the president to be “theaters of operation” and reduces the chance that army troops could be subjected to thorough human rights investigations by civilian or government agencies.⁸ President Pastrana is also under pressure to review the 1998 peace talk concession that ceded a Switzerland-sized swath of territory (called the despeje) southeast of Bogotá to the FARC as a safe-haven from government troops. The despeje, in addition to other territory held by the guerrillas, has left the FARC in control of about 90,000 civilians, ripe for recruitment, abduction, and forced labor.

With the peace talks at a standstill, many senior Colombian officials, including the three current presidential candidates (elections in 2002), are concerned that the despeje is being used to train terrorists, run prison camps, and traffic in drugs free from government scrutiny. Evidence to further support these concerns was highlighted by the recent arrest of three Irish Republican Army (IRA) representatives accused of training the FARC in bomb making techniques⁹. Jan Egeland, UN special advisor on Colombia, made a rare appearance before the media last week to convey the UN secretary-generals concern for the country’s “deteriorating situation.”¹⁰ During a visit on August 30, 2001, Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman commented that the future of the despeje is “. . . purely, wholly, totally and solely a matter for the Colombian government,”¹¹ despite evidence that the area serves as a stronghold for the FARC and is in seeming contradiction to the training being provided to the Colombian military to combat the drug trade. Danial Garcia-Pena, chief peace negotiator under President Pastrana’s

⁸ Scott Wilson, “Colombia Increases Military Powers: Law Could Threaten U.S. Aid Disbursement,” *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2001.

⁹ Christopher Marquis, “Colombian Deal with Rebels is Vexing U.S.,” *The New York Times*, 23 August 2001.

¹⁰ *The Economist*, “Into Battle,” 8-14 September 2001.

¹¹ Ibid.

predecessor, summed up the state of what is generally viewed as a failed peace process when he said, “I can’t think of any two entities more discredited in Colombia today than the FARC and Andres Pastrana.”¹²

Domestic Drug use –United States

When discussing the evolution of the National Drug Control Strategy, the Office of National Drug Control Policy said, “Drug abuse and related crime permeate every corner of our society, afflicting inner cities, affluent suburbs, and rural communities.”¹³ Drug traffickers operating from Colombia control wholesale level cocaine distribution throughout the heavily populated northeastern United States and along the eastern seaboard. Traffickers operating from Mexico (with Colombian product) control wholesale distribution throughout the western and Midwestern United States.¹⁴ Affecting young and old alike, drug use in the United States is an affliction that remains an epidemic. An estimated 14.8 million Americans were current users of illicit drugs in 1999, up from 12.0 million in 1992. Moreover, despite the stabilization of domestic cocaine use between 1992 and 1999, an estimated 242 metric tons of cocaine arrived in the United States in the first six months of 2000 (\$29 billion street value), an almost 40 percent increase over the 174 metric tons estimated to have arrived over the same period in 1999.¹⁵

¹² Tod Robberson, “Clock Ticking on Colombian Leader’s Peace Efforts. 2 Largest Guerrilla Groups Appear to be Preparing for War,” *The Dallas Morning News*, 23 August 23 2001.

¹³ *Office of National Drug Control Policy*, “Annual Report and the National Drug Control Strategy 2001: An Overview.”

¹⁴ *U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration*, Donnie R. Marshall, Administrator Drug Enforcement Administration, “DEA Congressional Testimony by before the Senate Committee on Appropriations and the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittees for the Departments of Commerce, Justice, State, the Judiciary and Related Agencies,” 17 May 2001.

¹⁵ *U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration*, “Drug use in the United States.”

Despite more focused eradication, interdiction, law enforcement and education initiatives, drug use among our youth is not declining.

Threats and Opportunities

Admiral James Loy, Commandant of the Coast Guard and interdiction coordinator in the United States counter-narcotics campaign recently said, “The President of the United States has maintained that because of the pain, deaths, and social disruptions they cause, illegal drugs are a threat to our national security I would also argue that if the 52,000 deaths and \$110 billion in economic losses we suffer each year as a result of illegal drugs were being imposed upon us by some foreign power or nation, the American people would rise up and demand that their government do much more to fight that menace.”¹⁶ While most Americans are aware that drug use in the United States is becoming more prevalent, many do not realize the profound impact that this drug epidemic has on the country as a whole. Wide spread drug use results in a less efficient, less productive workforce. According to a *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* survey, employees who test positive for drug use make more than twice as many workers’ compensation claims, use almost twice the medical benefits, and take one-third more leave time as compared to non-users. They are also 60 percent more likely to be responsible for accidents. In addition, drug related violence and crime pose a grave, and much more direct threat to the United States. According to the *1999 Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Program*, 75 percent of the male adults arrested in New York City for committing a violent crime tested positive for drug use. The report also showed that in smaller cities like Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, theses figures ranged as high as 64

¹⁶ James Kitfield, “The Anti-Smuggler’s Blues: The U.S. military’s effort to intercept and suppress supplies of drugs from Latin America is more massive that it seems, and of uncertain effectiveness,” *National Journal*, 18 August 2001.

percent.¹⁷ A December 1998 Bureau of Justice Statistics study found that 33 percent of state and 22 percent of federal prisoners said they committed their current offence while under the influence of drugs, and about one in six of both state and federal inmates said they committed their offence to get money for drugs. The drug epidemic is also taking a toll on the very core of American society - the family. One-quarter to one-half of all incidents of domestic violence are drug related and a survey of state child welfare agencies found substance abuse to be one of the key problems exhibited by 81 percent of the families reported for child maltreatment.¹⁸ Both threats and opportunities also exist at the international level. As stated earlier, Colombia is the world's leading producer of cocaine. This fact allows a uniquely focused opportunity at curtailing nearly the entire supply side of the cocaine supply-demand economic equation.

United States Strategy/Policy: Aspects of Power

Shortly after taking office, President Pastrana developed a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing Colombia's problems under "Plan Colombia", a \$7.5 billion plan designed to strengthen the Colombian economy and democracy and fight narcotics trafficking. On 13 July 2000, President Clinton signed into law a comprehensive \$1.3 billion assistance package in support of "Plan Colombia", an integrated strategy focusing on the peace process, the economy, the counter narcotics strategy, justice reform and human rights protection, and democratization and social development. This commitment supplemented ongoing counter narcotics programs totaling \$330 million. The aid package delivered in 2000-2001 was in the form of transport/attack helicopters and training by limited numbers of military and civilian

¹⁷ *U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, "Drug use in the United States."*

¹⁸ *Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Annual Report and the National Drug Control Strategy 2001: An Overview."*

contractor personnel, designed to help Colombia's military attack the lucrative drug trade. The plan also includes equipment and support for coca crop eradication by aerial spraying, money for alternative crops and non-drug related jobs, and assistance to the judicial system in dealing with both drug smuggling and money laundering investigation and prosecution. An additional \$882 million in financial aid is proposed by the Bush administration for 2002. The "Andean Regional Initiative" will support counter narcotics programs, democratic institution building and development assistance in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. In contrast to last year's "Plan Colombia" supplemental, less than half of the assistance will be for Colombia and only half of that will be for law enforcement and security assistance.

The United States strategy takes a long-term holistic view of the drug problem. In concert with initiatives like "Plan Colombia" and the "Andean Regional Initiative", the \$19 billion National Drug Control Strategy also includes drug education and treatment, local and international law enforcement, and interdiction. Interdiction efforts include nearly all branches of the armed forces and intelligence communities. In the Forward to the National Drug Control Policy, General (ret) Barry McCaffrey said, "We remain committed to the Strategy that focuses on shrinking America's demand for drugs through prevention and treatment while attacking the supply of drugs through law enforcement and international cooperation."¹⁹

Conclusion and Recommendations

The "war on drugs" is a war that we have been losing for the last 30 years. Between Presidents Nixon and Clinton, the strategy has drifted from one that emphasized primarily

¹⁹ *Office of National Drug Control Policy*, "Annual Report and the National Drug Control Strategy 2001: Forward."

treatment (Nixon) to one of primarily interdiction outside the United States borders (Clinton). It remains to be seen where the focus of supply versus demand side engagement in the “war on drugs” goes under the current administration. Certainly no single approach can rescue a hollow plan; however, one thing is certain: the “war on drugs” like the “war on terrorism” has for too long been relegated to back-page news by the American people and our leadership. While we gave our fullest attention to winning the Cold War and then on finding our way in the new world order, the dirty criminal element has left the back alley and become even dirtier businessmen operating a \$500 billion global narcotics industry. Despite the good starting point provided by “Plan Colombia” and the National Drug Control Policy, we have forced Colombia into acceptance of an ineffective aerial eradication plan as a stipulation for our support and have forgotten the simple message, “It’s the economy stupid.” The Colombian economy is dominated by drug production that is protected by the FARC, ELN and AUC. The problems faced by Colombia need to be addressed at the peace table before any serious support will be garnered from the farmers who are subject to living alongside multiple armed camps that do not concern themselves with human rights. Unfortunately, the United States has not directly participated in peace talks in Colombia since 1999, when three Americans were killed after being kidnapped by the FARC. Despite assurance from Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman that “no country could support the peace process more than the United States of America,”²⁰ we are taking no active roll in the process, which has been stalled for the last six months.

Conceptually, Plan Colombia and its successor the Andean Regional Initiative are a start in the right direction, but both are fundamentally flawed by what is referred to as “The Balloon

²⁰ *U.S. Department of State, International Information Programs*, “Transcript: Under Secretary Marc Grossman Press Conference in Bogotá,” 31 August 2001.

Effect.” Crop eradication efforts in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru were effective in eradicating crops in these countries, but the supply of drugs into the United States showed no signs of decline because Colombia increased production by 60 percent since 1999 to meet the demand. Just like squeezing a balloon makes the air bulge on the other side, crop eradication merely shifts coca production. Although the United States government claims that crop eradication has been successful, acreage under coca crop cultivation in Colombia has increased since spraying began. As coca growers move into more isolated areas to escape crop eradication, their transportation costs increase and they must grow more plants to make the same amount of money. Today, for every acre of coca crops eradicated in southern Colombia, three acres of Amazon rainforest are cut down to replace them.²¹ The eradication program is further hindered by ground-fire attacks on spray planes resulting in application at a higher altitude with less accuracy. As a result, people, animals, water supplies and basic subsistence crops are as likely to be sprayed as the coca field. Although the chemical Glyphosate (enhanced version of the common commercial weed killer Roundup) has not been shown to cause any harmful side effects to humans, animals or aquatic life, the perception by the majority of Colombians is that Glyphosate spraying has caused both widespread crop damage and minor health effects such as diarrhea, vomiting, skin rashes, and respiratory ailments. Since government support by the peasant farmers is vital to reduce coca production and resist the guerrilla forces, the perception that the government is poisoning the people and killing the very crops needed to survive is devastating to the intent of Plan Colombia.

²¹ *The Colombia Mobilization*: National coalition of organizations and individuals working to transform U.S. policy toward Colombia and the Andean region, “Aerial Eradication: Health and Environmental Effects.”

Crop substitution is also integral to Plan Colombia. With unemployment hovering around 18 percent, underemployment 29 percent, and 24 million Colombians in poverty, tens of thousands of families have migrated to the wilderness to work coca plantations, mostly in southern and eastern Colombia, far from government control. “More than 34,000 families have already signed manual-eradication pacts” as part of a five-year \$222.5 million USAID package to help peasants make a living from legal crops said Mr. Grossman. Although that is about half the families estimated to be farming coca, many of these same farmers concede that they accept crop-substitution funds but continue to grow drug crops since legal crops are too difficult to get to market because there are no roads.

The United States is acting like an absentee landlord, always complaining but never around to do any of the hard work. “The problem is that the law of the marketplace is overtaking the law of the state,” former President Pizano said in an interview. “We cannot continue to fight this war alone. If the consuming nations do nothing to curb demand, to control money-laundering, to halt the flow of chemicals that supply the drug-production labs, then in a few short years, the world is going to see legalization as the answer.”²² In a similar vein, President Pastrana has requested the United States re-establish intelligence-sharing with Colombia’s air force about suspected drug flights, and urged President Bush to help organize an international narcotics conference. None of this has happened.

The conclusion drawn by the producers of a recent Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) Frontline special title “Drug Wars” is that “the most surprising thread is the agreement by virtually every drug enforcement official interviewed that the decades-long strategy of fighting

²² Tod Robberson, “Many Colombians Back Decriminalization, But U.S. Presses Fight,” *The Dallas Morning News*, 29 August 23 2001.

drugs through interdiction and tough sentencing should be replaced with a policy emphasizing drug treatment, education, and prevention—hallmarks of the original drug strategy begun under President Nixon.” Despite the unintended physical, moral, and social consequences, a counterpoint to prevention is legalization. Although I don’t think legalized drug use is a solution given the overwhelming uncertainties involved, we certainly need to reconsider our priorities in how we as a nation address the “drug war”. Our strategy needs to recognize that the “drug war” is an international issue, requiring the cooperation of all nations to address the production, interdiction and money laundering that are common problems in most countries. Our focus also needs to shift away from supply side (balloon effect) to demand side (education, treatment, and prevention) economics, we need to start listening to the countries we are trying to help rather than take the absentee landlord (squatter) approach, and above all else, we need to focus more quality time, finances and effort to fixing problems in our own back yard.